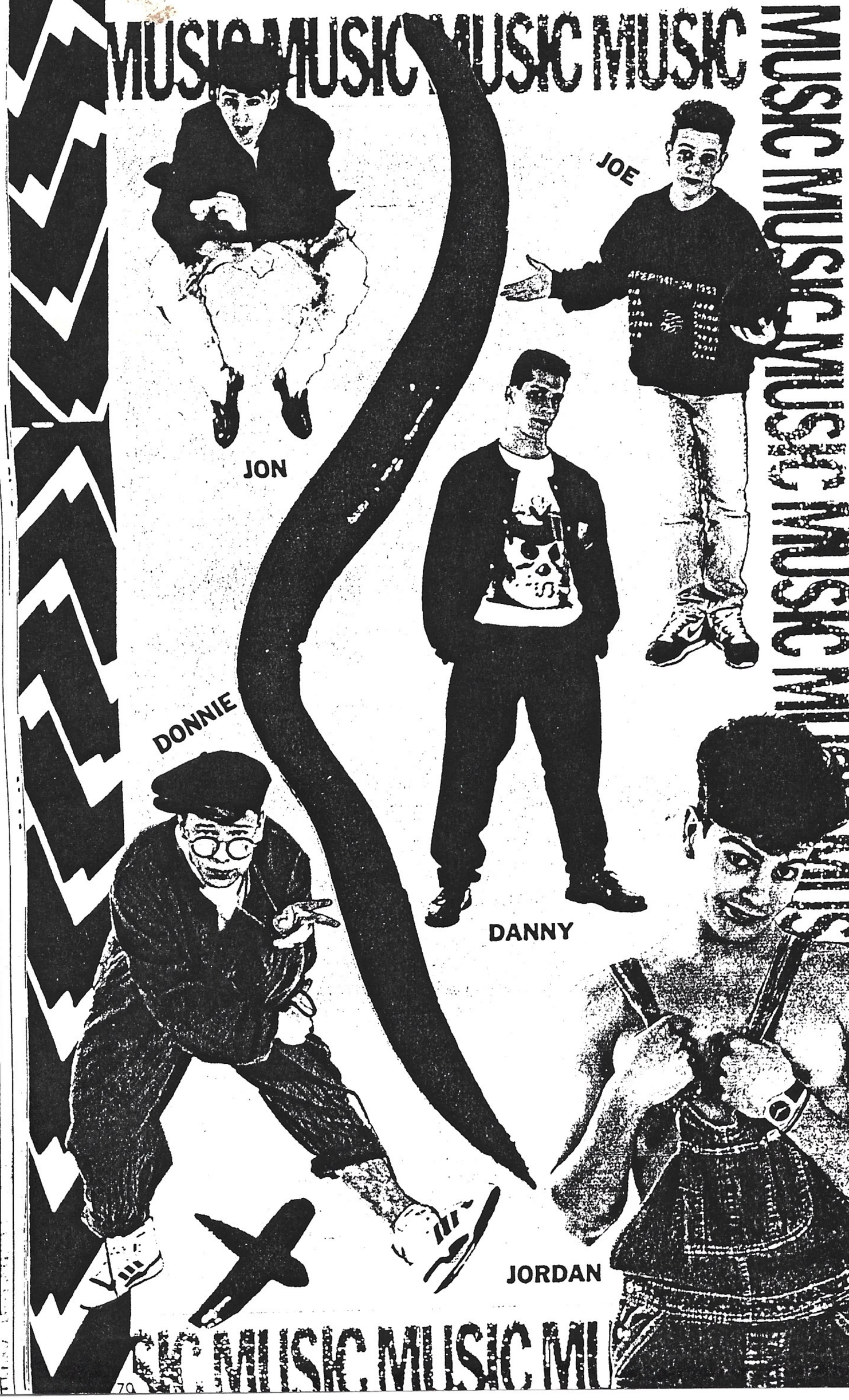
seventeen

SEPTEMBER 1989

TALENT

New kids on the block



It's midafternoon on a Sunday in New York City, and *everyone*, it seems, has turned out for a parade on Fifth Avenue. Not far away in the downtown loft that serves as a studio for SEVENTEEN photographer Janette Beckman, five extremely energetic guys, aka New Kids on the Block, begin to goof on each other as they change into their "work clothes": overalls (no shirts required), fatigues, and strategically ripped jeans.

While our shutterbug sets up her lights, the darkly handsome Knight brothers, Jordan and Jon, eighteen and nineteen, the new wave-ishly adorable Donnie Wahlberg, nineteen, and the ponytailed and muscular Danny Wood, nineteen, are dancing and practicing their poses to the music that blasts in the background, while the youngest and sweetest of the group, Joe McIntyre, fifteen, is busy flipping through the latest issue of SEVENTEEN (hey, the kid knows what's important reading).

The guys have just returned from the local Tower Records, where they saw their faces plastered all over the store advertising their number-one album, *Hangin' Tough* (Columbia). Passing through the aisles of albums in the nearly empty store without being recognized, and therefore mobbed, was a rare—and lately somewhat forgotten—experience for the boys. As Jon points out, "We can't always go where we want to, like a shopping mall. Sometimes if it's just one of us, we can get away with it. Like if somebody asks, 'Is that you?' I just say, 'No.'"

Shopping is a favorite pastime for the Kids, who all share an awesome interest in clothes. "Donnie used to call me *GQ*," says Jon with a sheepish grin. "But I think the way we look is important to all of us." Their cute hip-hop style of dress can be traced back to when they were just a bunch of normal kids attending Boston public schools during the day and break-dancing at local clubs on Friday nights.

But it was Donnie's reputation as a ham and an entertainer that caught the attention of record producer Maurice Starr. Starr wanted to create another version of his outrageously successful group New Edition. He immediately recognized the talent of the five young Bostonians and began to set the wheels in motion. He taught them everything, from their smooth dance routines (inspired by their break-dancing days) to how to perform in front of a live audience.

One thing he couldn't prevent, though, was opening-night jitters, a case of which Jordan remembers only too well. "Our first performance ever was a showcase at a neighborhood school in *(continued on page 76)*

Photos, Janette Beckman. Hair and grooming, Byron Barnes.

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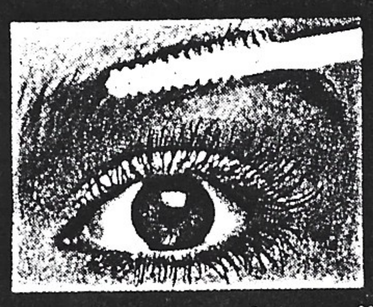
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New kids on the block

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Boston, and I was nervous—the whole group was—but I started getting nervous a month before the show! When my lead parts came up, I didn't even go to the front of the stage. I stayed in back and hid behind my mike. I guess we've improved since then—drastically.''

Today, New Kids on the Block are veteran entertainers and have performed before thousands of adoring fans. In the process they've been sharing the stage with many famous musicians, like Miami Sound Machine, the Pointer Sisters, and Tiffany. And this fall they'll play a concert in London with George Michael and Tina Turner. Jon can remember back to a time when the Kids were in awe of the celebrities they met, but ''when we meet people now, no matter who they are, we can relate to them. I think, 'Hey, they're just like me.' Maybe if we met Michael Jackson . . . that'd be a different story.'' As for their fans, he adds, ''It feels good to know that we're liked by so many people and that we're making everyone happy. I think that feeling is probably better than any drug you could take. It's great! It goes right through you.''

While on the road the Kids get to enjoy some favorite activities, among them playing pool and video games, chicken fights and swims in the hotel pools, and basketball. The one major drawback, however, is the difficulty of maintaining relationships. If one of them meets a girl in a city, he has to say good-bye to her before they leave for the next town—which is usually the next day. Jordan had a girlfriend back in Boston, but he had to break it off because he was away so much of the time. ''So now we just look,'' says Jon, ''and wish.'' The usually buoyant Donnie adds solemnly, ''I *really* want a girlfriend . . . to take her for walks on a beach.'' Just imagine the number of volunteers he would have for the job!

Being away from home so much means the guys miss their families a lot. And, of course, the feeling is mutual. Jon says, smiling, ''My mother always says she misses me and stuff, so I think I'm going to buy her a little puppy dog to keep her company while I'm gone.''

Last spring marked the end of high school for all the boys except Joe, and they have no immediate plans for college. Right now they're setting their sights on writing songs, directing videos, and producing their own records.

Recently, New Kids on the Block were honored by Governor Michael Dukakis for their efforts in the fight against drug abuse by declaring April 24 ''New Kids on the Block Day'' in the state of Massachusetts. It was during the ceremony in Boston that the governor presented the group with their platinum records. ''That was really exciting,'' recalls Jon. ''It really made us feel we had accomplished something. We became involved after doing a show for the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs, and after that show we said, 'Hey, this is great. If we're considered role models and kids are looking up to us, we might as well use our power to do something positive in the world.' We strongly believe that drugs are no good, and we were very honored that the governor felt he should recognize us for what we've been doing with his and other antidrug organizations.''

''The neighborhood we come from is rough,'' says Jordan. ''It's an inner-city neighborhood, and there's a lot of crime there, not gangs and drive-by shootings, but a lot of drugs. We see a lot of people just hanging out, standing on the street corners and wasting their lives away using drugs. That's why I thank our producer for taking us under his wing and working with us, getting us into music. If we can survive, you can *definitely* survive. Now we have something to do besides hanging out. We get to visit different places, see things we've never seen before. A lot of times, when we go back to Boston, we'll have some different clothes on and all our friends'll be like, 'Where have you been? What's this you're wearing?' And we'll say, 'Hey, we've just seen the rest of the world.' And they look at us like we're crazy.''

—Danny McCue

Sara Gilbert

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herself from Darlene. Take the episode when Darlene can't sleep, so she just mopes around the house and her parents bombard her with questions (''Were you worried about your baseball game?'' ''Did you screw up in history again?''). Finally she comes out with it: ''I got my period. Okay?'' That's what Darlene's all about. ''She'll keep her emotions inside and then all of a sudden just explode,'' explains Sara. ''I'm different from that. I'm more outward.''

Sara *has* to be outspoken to be noticed in her fame-filled family. Her grandfather, Harry Crane, created one of television's classic comedy shows, *The Honeymooners*, and Sara grew up in the shadow of her beautiful and successful sister Melissa Gilbert, star of *Little House on the Prairie* for nine years. Jonathan, her older brother, also appeared on the show. ''I was always jealous of them,'' she admits. ''They'd get fan mail, and they'd come home with all these presents—little things that you never need but love to get.''

When she was younger, Sara occasionally acted in TV *(continued on page 88)*